

Compromised Identities?

Reflections on perpetration and complicity under Nazism.

Student guidance

At UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, we have produced these materials to guide and support you using the online [Compromised Identities exhibition](#).

You might use these materials and those in the exhibition in a guided way with support from your teachers, or independently, to expand your contextual knowledge and understanding of this history, or as part of your research for your A Level coursework/ non examined assessment / topic-based essay.

Introduction

Aims of the exhibition

The Compromised Identities exhibition is the result of a collaborative interdisciplinary research project at University College London (UCL), funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Pears Foundation. With Nazi Germany as a case study, it explores these important questions:

- How do people become complicit in systems of collective violence?
- How do shifting patterns of everyday behaviour eventually lead to persecution, exploitation, and murder?
- And how do people respond to what later, under different circumstances may be seen as a 'compromised' past? (<https://compromisedidentities.com/>)

Using oral histories, court cases, and portrayals in film, literature and the media, the project considers the motivation of those who witnessed and those who took part in the crimes of the Third Reich, and the ways in which they have been represented in the post war era.

Your knowledge and understanding

The use of this material and its accompanying resources in an educational setting requires some prior knowledge and understanding of Nazi Germany, Nazi ideology, organisations, and crimes, during the period of the Third Reich.

This exhibition does not aim to retell the story of the Nazi period, but to depict how people and societies reflect upon their roles in it and provide insights into the functioning of the Nazi system and the roles that individuals played within it. However, the roles of the individuals and organisations are contextualised in the text below.

To understand how and why the Holocaust happened, it is always important to explore why and how people participated or became complicit in these crimes and the materials in this exhibition can be used to facilitate this.

Approaching perpetrator material

It is always important to be critical when working with sources in History. This can be especially important and challenging when working with the sources in this exhibition. This is because most of the materials are created by the perpetrators of the Holocaust and from their point of view, or they record the arguments perpetrators

made to justify their actions. Whilst all of these sources contain bias, they are useful for understanding why perpetrators and collaborators behaved as they did. If you are not sure, it might be useful to talk to your teacher about a source and see if they can support you in making use of it.

There are some questions to consider whenever you're using sources from this exhibition:

- Is this source useful for the enquiry or coursework question I am working on?
- Who created this source?
- What is the *purpose* of this source? Why was it created?
- When was this source created? Was it during the Second World War, or afterwards?
- Does this person have an incentive to lie or mislead (for example, to avoid prosecution)?
- Do I know from working with other sources or my own knowledge that a claim is unlikely or impossible?
- Does this person appear to continue to believe in Nazi ideology, or have antisemitic views?

The "[Questions about filmed interviews](#)" section of the exhibition can help you to work critically with these sources.

Approaching Photography

When exploring the photographs in the exhibition, it is important to remember that photographs are not a neutral record of a period – individuals chose to take photographs of specific subjects. Just as with the interviews and other materials, you should be critical when using the photographs as sources, especially as most were taken from a perpetrator perspective. As photography was less accessible than today, and the process of using film and dark rooms to develop photographs was more time-consuming, photographers in the past tended to be more deliberate.

There are some questions to consider whenever you're using photographs from the exhibition:

- Who took the photograph?
- Why might they have taken the photograph?
- What have they chosen to capture?
- What might they have chosen to omit?
- Who is the subject of the photo? How are they being represented?
- Is this photo part of a broader pattern, or an isolated example?
- What contextual knowledge do I need to understand this photograph?

The 'explore further' section 'Questions around visual images' has several examples of photographs with prompt questions to help you.

There are photographs in this exhibition that you may find upsetting or difficult, especially in Sections 3 and 4.

Themes: Responsibility / complicity / causation – How was the Holocaust possible?

How might you use the exhibition with students?

The issues and themes that are explored in this online exhibition complement a number of History A Level courses as indicated below. You may wish to use and explore these resources and materials as part of your SOL with your students. Additionally, they may be used to complement your SOL and provide opportunities for extending and consolidating your students' knowledge and understanding through independent learning.

Relevant History A Level specifications / units:

[AQA 20 Democracy and Nazism: Germany, 1918–1945](#)

[Pearson Edexcel Paper 1, option 1G: Germany and West Germany 1918 – 89](#)

[Pearson Edexcel Paper 3, option 37.2: Germany 1871 – 1990, united, divided and reunited](#)

[OCR Unit Y221: Democracy and Dictatorships in Germany 1919–1963](#)

Possible Coursework Questions

You may want to encourage students to make use of the exhibit when they are undertaking research for their history A Level coursework (non-examined assessment, topic-based essay) allowing them to make use of the primary materials, testimony and scholarship as sources in their work. This will be particularly pertinent to OCR and Pearson Edexcel-style questions. Below are some suggested questions which the exhibition could support:

OCR exemplar questions:

How far were ordinary Germans complicit in the Holocaust?

*Assess the view that the German people were active and enthusiastic supporters of the Holocaust.
To what extent did the people of Germany accept Nazi racial policies between 1933 and 1945?
Were ordinary Germans simply by-standers during the Holocaust?*

Edexcel exemplar question:

“Historians have disagreed about the extent of public support for the Holocaust within Germany itself. What is your view about the extent of public support for the Holocaust within Germany itself?”

Much of the exhibition explores themes of complicity and responsibility, and many of the interviews interrogate the responsibility of ordinary people. Here we have suggested some guidance on questions to consider when making use of different material in the exhibit.

Deepening Contextual Knowledge

In addition to the foci and questions we have highlighted above, some aspects of the exhibition may be useful as a resource for teaching the wider history of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Whilst this document cannot list them exhaustively, there are a few of particular note. At the start of each section is a brief contextual blurb which will help summarise the period and orient students who are exploring the exhibition independently. There is also an interactive map, which shows the geographical spread of many of the materials and sources used in the exhibition, supporting students in developing a spatial and chronological understanding of the period. In addition, the Further Resources section contains a large collection of primary resources which may be useful in first teaching.

Follow the hyperlinks below to take you directly to the relevant section of the online exhibition. Use the accompanying context and questions to consider are to help you to explore the relevant sections with your students.

[1] [Compromised Identities?](#)

“Exciting Times”



Context

In early February 1945, some 400 Soviet prisoners of war tried to escape Mauthausen concentration camp by climbing the walls. Those who were not immediately killed by gunfire from the camp guards managed to run into the surrounding countryside.

The war was nearly over. The Allies were getting closer, and these desperate men, badly weakened and half-starved, tried to find shelter and scraps of food from the people in the nearby town of Mauthausen, and at farms and houses in the neighbouring villages. At each door, they begged for help and not to be handed over to the SS.

The SS and local Nazi Party officials recruited and armed the local people to help them in the hunt for the escaped prisoners of war. Boys too young for army service, elderly men, farm women and women shopkeepers joined in the fugitive hunt.

In this video, Margarethe S. recounts her employment and leisure in and around the concentration camp of Mauthausen, the murder of escaped POWs and the end of the war.

Questions to consider:

What does this suggest about the complicity of local population(s) in the treatment of concentration camp prisoners?

“Denunciation”



Context

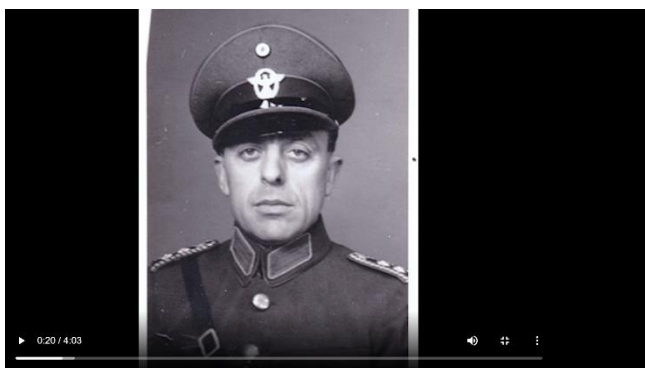
Once the Nazis were in power, they demanded conformity from citizens. In their attempt to do this they established a police state. A key organisation within the Nazi police state was the Gestapo. The Gestapo was the secret state police, responsible for identifying and removing enemies of the Nazi state. Followers wanted to show loyalty and former critics felt the need to demonstrate consent; many started to report others to the authorities. Recent research suggests that in some places in Germany as many as 80% of the investigations carried out by the Gestapo started because of information voluntarily given by the German people.

Questions to consider:

Why did people choose to denounce others to the regime?

What does this suggest about levels of complicity with the regime?

“Bruno Bruckner: photographer, accomplice, eye-witness?”



In July 1933 the Nazis passed the ‘Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring’. In their ideological view of the world the Nazis believed that those with mental or physical disabilities were worthless and made Germany weak. This law allowed the compulsory sterilisation of those the Nazis considered to be hereditarily ill.

From September 1939, upon the orders of Hitler, this policy of sterilisation had developed into one of mass murder. A special unit, T4, was established to kill disabled children. This was later extended to adults. By the end of the Second World War, approximately 250,00 people had been killed. Bruno Bruckner photographed victims of

the T4 so-called 'euthanasia' project. He was never convicted of Nazi crimes, even presenting himself as a victim.

Question to consider:

As a photographer of these crimes, do you consider Bruno Bruckner to be complicit in the crimes at Hartheim?

Would you consider Bruno Bruckner to be a perpetrator, bystander or collaborator?

“How many people were involved in perpetration?”



Using the diagram, consider the following:

What does this suggest about how widespread perpetration was in German and Austrian society?

What does this suggest about public involvement in the Holocaust?

What does this suggest about how the Holocaust was possible?

[2] Creating a Hostile Environment

“The slippery slope 1933-5”



From 1933 onwards, ‘non-Aryan’ Germans were progressively excluded from the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community) – with the complicity of many Germans.

Questions to consider:

How did the actions of the Nazi state develop a culture of hostility?

How significant was the removal of the protections of citizenship for German Jews?

How did the majority respond to open persecution?

“Sad accomplice”



In March 1938 Nazi Germany absorbed Austria into ‘Greater Germany’, making Austria a German province. Immediately thousands of those whom the Nazis considered to be opponents were arrested and Jewish people were attacked and subjected to the discriminatory laws of Nazi Germany. A former Austrian librarian speaks of her feelings about refusing books to a Jewish reader.

Questions to consider:

Would you consider the librarian to be complicit and to what extent?
Could she have acted differently?
How does she attempt to explain her actions during the Nazi period?
Do you agree with the title of this film – “Sad accomplice”?

Turning points: Kristallnacht, 1938

Throughout the night and into the following day, 9 – 10 November 1938, the Nazis instigated and led a wave of brutal violence against Germany's Jewish population. In this outburst of state sponsored violence, which was given the name Kristallnacht, Night of Broken Glass, by the German people, Jewish properties, synagogues, businesses and homes were destroyed. Approximately 100 Jewish people were killed, and 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and imprisoned in concentration camps where they faced brutal treatment. They were only released if they agreed to leave Germany.

Questions to consider:

Why is Kristallnacht considered to be a turning point? What were the responses of the non-Jewish German population to the visible violence? In what ways did their responses diverge? What message did these responses send to the perpetrators? What impact did these responses have upon future perpetration?

Further resources

There are several other resources which may be useful for an enquiry focussed upon themes of responsibility / complicity / causation that form part of the exhibition. Here is a selection that you may find of particular use:

Film collection

'We knew nothing about it: Deportations and the Germans.'



From October 1941 onwards Jewish people from the Greater German Reich (German, Austrian and Czech Jews) began to be deported to ghettos, shooting sites, concentration camps and killing centres located in the East. They were deported by train to locations in the East where they were murdered.

Questions to consider:

What do we now know about deportations and the Germans? What did German people have knowledge of at the time?

Themes: Justice – Why was post war justice limited? Or, in what ways was post war justice limited?

How might you use the exhibition with students?

These sections of the exhibition explore the limitations of prosecutions and denazification, focussing on a few select prosecutors and perpetrators in the post-war period. It contains a great deal of useful source material for exploring the process with your students, as well as the commentary of scholars in the field.

Relevant History A Level specifications / unit:

[Pearson Edexcel Paper 1, option 1G: Germany and West Germany 1918 – 89](#)

[Pearson Edexcel Paper 3, option 37.2: Germany 1871 – 1990, united, divided and reunited](#)

[6]. [Where have all the Nazis gone?](#)

Context

After the defeat of Germany in 1945, some top Nazis escaped, or were executed or imprisoned after the war. But the millions who had been involved in Nazi violence did not simply go away.

Following early trials and denazification, most former Nazis were rehabilitated. The new post-war states officially denounced Nazism but made compromises. West Germany acknowledged responsibility but amnestied former Nazis at the expense of justice. East Germany, the self-proclaimed 'anti-fascist state', absolved itself of responsibility, but effected radical social transformation by political oppression. Austria adopted the convenient label of having been 'Hitler's first victim' and barely confronted Nazi legacies. This section of the exhibition explores these the lives of these former Nazis and their relationship to these new states and will support students with questions that look at the limitations of denazification efforts.

“Café Lerch” and “Cultural Reckonings: Artistic Afterlives of Ernst Lerch”



Ernst Lerch was an SS officer and Nazi Party member involved in the actions of Operation Reinhard, the plan to systematically murder all the Jews in the region of occupied Poland referred to as the 'General Government'. In that region, Lerch was responsible for overseeing 'Jewish affairs' working closely with Odilo Globocnik, who organised the murder of one and a half million Jews. Despite several trials, Lerch remained free until the end of his life in 1997.

Questions to consider:

How were perpetrators like Lerch able to evade prosecution?

What does the continued prominence of Lerch indicate about post-war Austria?

Why were responses to Ernst Lerch mainly in the cultural sphere? What does this say about the success of denazification?



“Administering death at a distance: Deitrich Allers and Euthanasia murders”



The ‘T4 Euthanasia programme’ is named for the address of the chancellery offices that organised the programme, based at Tiergartenstreaasse 4 in Berlin. The term ‘euthanasia’ here is a euphemism, as there was no concern for the quality of life of the victims nor interest in their consent. From October 1939, doctors and other medical professionals such as midwives, were given responsibility to end the lives of those judged to be ‘life unworthy of life’, leading to the systematic murder of people with disabilities, initially starting with young children. Many medical professionals committed these crimes due to a belief in an ideology of ‘racial hygiene’, believing the disabled ‘weakened’ the Aryan ‘race’. These murders were sometimes committed by forced starvation or other means which could appear accidental, but six gassing facilities were also established across Greater Germany. The families of victims would receive a death certificate listing a fabricated cause of death. After protest, the practice was officially ended in 1941 but continued in secret until the end of the Nazi regime. More than 70,000 disabled people, disproportionately children, were murdered in this programme between January 1940 and August 1941, and perhaps as many as 250,000 by the end of the war. After the official termination of the T4 programme in August 1941, many of the personnel would use their experiences in the death camps established by Operation Reinhard in Poland.

Dietrich Allers was one such figure who had worked at the headquarters at Tiergartenstrasse 4 overseeing the euthanasia programme and would later apply his experience to working at the death camp Sobibor.

Questions to consider:

How was Dietrich Allers able to regain his position and status?

What do Dietrich Allers’ continued beliefs in ‘racial hygiene’ and eugenics suggest?

What does the continued prominence of Allers and his network suggest about denazification in post-war West Germany?

“Keeping the Trains Rolling”



Context

As the Nazis occupied large swathes of Europe during the Second World War, they brought under their control large and diverse Jewish populations. From 1941, huge numbers of these Jews were transported by rail from the far corners of occupied Europe to the death camps that had been established in Eastern Europe. This movement of millions of people required large amounts of work from ‘ordinary’ Germans like Hugo G’s father, who had significant knowledge about the ‘open secret’ of the Holocaust and the fate of Jews deported to camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau. Many of these individuals have complex attitudes towards the Nazi regime and their part in the regime’s atrocities which are explored in this film.

Questions to consider:

What kind of justifications are used by Hugo G for his family’s involvement? What does this suggest?

What does this video suggest about the knowledge and understanding ordinary Germans had of killing centres like Auschwitz?

What role does Hugo G’s religion play in this interview?

What does this video suggest about the ‘compromised identities’ of those who supported the organisation of the Holocaust?

[7] [Has justice been done?](#)

“Judges, prosecutors, and witnesses in the West German Treblinka trial”



This segment of the exhibition explores the efforts and difficulties the prosecution faced at the trial of ten SS men who had worked at Treblinka, including the deputy commander of the camp, Kurt Franz. Treblinka, one of the ‘Operation Reinhard’ death camps, was the site of the killing of over 700,000 people over the course of its operation, including the Jewish population of Warsaw, the largest ghetto in occupied Europe.

Questions to consider:

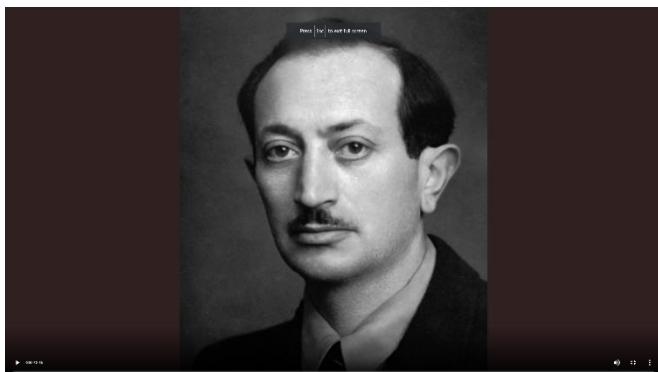
What were the challenges for prosecutors in these trials?

Why was the West German legal establishment limited in its commitment to prosecution?

How were the majority of defendants able to evade sentencing?

What does this segment of the exhibition indicate about justice for Nazi perpetrators in West Germany?

“Nazis, survivors, and politics in Austria” and “The failure of Justice in Austria”



This segment of the exhibition explores the work of Simon Wiesenthal in Austria and the obstacles he faced. Simon Wiesenthal, an Austrian Holocaust survivor, worked tirelessly from the late 1940s to the mid-1980s to bring Nazi perpetrators to justice. However, institutions often refused to cooperate with him, many people were opposed to the trials and the ruling parties wanted to win over former Nazis as voters. In 1970, Wiesenthal exposed the Nazi pasts of four Austrian government ministers. The chancellor, Bruno Kreisky, leader of the Social Democratic Party and a socialist of Jewish descent, was dismayed. His aim was to integrate former Nazis. **Questions to consider:**

What were the challenges for prosecutors in prosecuting Nazi cases?

Why was the limited definition of ‘murder’ so problematic for trials?

What obstacles did Simon Wiesenthal face in bringing perpetrators to justice?

Why were politicians in Austria reluctant to prosecute?

Overall, what does the evidence from these films suggest about justice for Nazi perpetrators in Austria?

Overall questions:

What does the exhibition suggest about the obstacles to bringing Nazi perpetrators to justice?

What were the similarities and differences in response between Austria, West Germany and the GDR?

To what extent was justice done for Nazi crimes?

Further Resources

There are several other resources which may be useful for an enquiry into post-war justice that form part of the exhibition. You can find prompt questions for each by following the link below.

[‘Justifications for killing’](#). These extracts from an SS perpetrator to his wife may be juxtaposed against some of the post-war claims made in the other interviews and may give an insight into the motivations of perpetrator.

[‘Perpetrator or rescuer?’](#) This film features an interview which is then analysed by the historians responsible for the exhibition, modelling a highly critical response to sources of this kind. It may be useful for exploring how perpetrators justified their actions and spoke about them in the post-war period. You may wish to consider this alongside the extracts from ‘Justifications for killing’.

[‘Post-war justifications’](#). This excerpt from an interrogation in the GDR can be useful for questions that examine the differences between the GDR, West Germany and Austria in questions of post-war justice, and may also be compared with the wartime ‘Justifications for killing’ extracts.

[‘Knowledge about atrocities’](#) and [‘Innocent Bystanders?’](#) These reports give an insight into the attitude of many Germans towards their Nazi past in the immediate post-war era, through an Allied lens. It may be useful to compare these to other justifications and explanations of involvement seen throughout the exhibition, particularly those formulated much later in time.